

Trivial Pursuits

Mark Berry feels shortchanged by the newly completed 'Ring' at Aix

Götterdämmerung. Ben Heppner (Siegfried), Gerd Grochowski (Gunther), Mikhail Petrenko (Hagen), Dale Duesing (Alberich), Katarina Dalayman (Brünnhilde), Emma Vetter (Gutrune), Anne Sofie von Otter (Waltraute), Maria Radner (First Norn), Lilli Paasikivi (Second Norn), Miranda Keys (Third Norn), Anna Siminska (Woglinde), Eva Vogel (Wellgunde), Maria Radner (Floßhilde); Berlin Radio Chorus (chorus master: Simon Halsey), Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Simon Rattle; Stéphane Braunschweig (director, designs, video), Thibault Vancraenenbroeck (costumes, video), Marion Hewlett (lighting). Festival d'Aix en Provence: Grand Théâtre de Provence, 6 July 2009

And so, this *Ring*, a co-production between the Aix Festival and the Salzburg Easter Festival, has reached its conclusion. I have not yet seen the *Rheingold* but have seen *Die Walküre* on DVD and *Siegfried* in the theatre.¹ As with those previous dramas, the greatest achievement proved to be that of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Luxury casting seems an understatement for so virtuosic a force in the pit. There were very occasional slips. Almost inevitable from the horn players, even theirs were limited to a handful, really only serving to remind one that these were human beings: perhaps no bad thing in recounting the twilight of the gods. Moreover, there remains a degree of loss in terms of 'old German' orchestral sound: Karajan's work is now more than complete. Taking the internationalisation of the orchestra as a given, however, aspects of this performance bade fair to set new standards for technical excellence. I have never heard low brass play with such dramatic force in those passages, later in the first act and during the second, in which Wagner conjures dramatically necessary sounds of instrumental and harmonic ugliness quite unprecedented. The trombones and Wagner tubas had to be heard to be believed. Hagen's call to the vassals and their response struck terror into one's soul, at least as much from the voice of Wagner's orchestral Greek chorus as from that of the excellent Berlin Radio Chorus.

Simon Rattle continued his good work in the pit. Again, I had the impression that his interpretation would deepen with further immersion in the score, but already he had the measure of its structural import and orchestral detail. Even the BPO cannot play *Götterdämmerung* by itself. Wagner conductors whom we justly revere, such as Hans Knappertsbusch, could often prove surprisingly casual with matters of colour; not so Rattle. His experience in French music and that of the orchestra – take the previous night's concert of Ravel and Boulez, under the latter composer's baton, or Rattle's own recent *L'enfant et les sortilèges* – is put to excellent use in back-projection of a sometimes undervalued aspect of Wagner's compositional legacy. My only real reservation was his occasional tendency to press too hard, not so much in terms of tempo, though there were one or two instances of that, as of orchestral sound. There were, especially during the first act, a few cases of a brutalisation of sound that did not always tally with dramatic purpose, reminiscent not so much of Karajan's Wagner – the *Ring* in particular

¹ See, respectively, reviews in *The Wagner Journal*, iii/1 (2009), 91–3, and ii/3 (2008), 73–5.



Siegfried (Ben Heppner) and the Rhinemaidens in Stéphane Braunschweig's *Götterdämmerung* at Aix.
Photo Elisabeth Carecchio

often exhibited a chamber-like delicacy under the Austrian conductor's baton – as some of his 1970s Beethoven.

Ben Heppner would doubtless be many listeners' Siegfried of choice from the options available today. He certainly has the vocal resources to bring off a near-impossible role, though the results are accomplished rather than exciting. Given some of the horrors to which we have been subjected, it might seem churlish to withhold fuller appreciation. Yet, onstage, this Siegfried cut a less than heroic, indeed a less than convincing, figure – and not out of dramatic strategy. There is something awry when Hagen exudes charismatic leadership, while Siegfried appears to be unsuccessfully auditioning for the title role in an am-dram assault upon *Peter Grimes*. In Wagner's words, 'The Greeks' tragic hero stepped forward from the Chorus and, turning back towards it, said: "Behold, thus does a man act; that which you celebrate in commentaries and adages, I depict to you as irrefutable and necessary."² This was not achieved in Siegfried's case, despite a sure command of the vocal line. Mikhail Petrenko's Hagen, as I have hinted, was another matter altogether. Strikingly different from the typical portrayal, this was a Hagen whose personal and political skills might well have persuaded rather than bludgeoned one into following him. He was not so black of tone as when he had essayed Hunding, let alone by comparison with other Hagens. Though not an unduly light reading, this had chilling moments of almost whispered – yet still sung – menace, ably supported by the orchestra, as well as a terrifying, understated Jekyll and Hyde routine. Confident

² Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama*, ed. Klaus Kropfinger (Stuttgart, 1994), 63.

and unabashedly sexy when pulling the strings, whether of his vassals or half-siblings, in private moments he exhibited signs of deformity, in physical and other senses, and conveyed warnings that everything might readily unravel. This was a superlative revisionist performance, vocally and onstage.

Katarina Dalayman's Brünnhilde had a few wayward moments but was otherwise a strong presence. She drew with discrimination from a varied vocal palette, resulting in an unusually credible characterisation. When she strode onstage following the return of Siegfried's body, there was an almost Hollywood sense of star quality – heightened by Rattle's handling of the strings. Yet the aura added to rather than distracted from her final deeds as Brünnhilde. Gerd Grochowski's Gunther resembled his Telramund, seen recently in Berlin and in London.³ His is not an especially powerful voice, but Grochowski made a dramatic virtue out of vocal necessity, presenting an admirably detailed portrait of political vacillation, aided by stage demeanour of aristocratic distraction. Emma Vetter's Guttrune was made to resemble a cross between Linda Evans in *Dynasty* and the late Diana Dors, not the only occasion when Thibault Vancraenenbroeck's costumes seemed at odds with Stéphane Braunschweig's generally non-interventionist – almost *konzeptlos* – production. This might not especially have mattered, had we been treated to a more than adequate vocal performance. Anne Sofie von Otter's Waltraute proved a disappointment. She granted commendable attention, as one might have expected, to the words; yet vocally, this remained an earthbound portrayal. Dale Duesing's Alberich again impressed as an example – appropriate, considering his son – of a lighter-toned, word-sensitive approach to the role. I shall be interested to see him in *Das Rheingold*. The Norns and Rhinemaidens were cast from strength and did not disappoint.

I am at a loss when it comes to Braunschweig's production. There is nothing to which one can vehemently object; nor can I discern any particular insights, let alone revelations. According to a programme interview, what Braunschweig 'likes' in *Götterdämmerung* is that here, following 'the development of great philosophical and psychological' questions in the preceding dramas, 'one returns to a more trivial level, to an almost bourgeois drama'. It is a point of view, I suppose: potentially suggestive of parallels with Ibsen, and not entirely unrelated to George Bernard Shaw's writing off the *Ring*'s final drama for having succumbed to the 'Love panacea'.⁴ Yet, wrongheaded though I considered, earlier in the cycle, Braunschweig's near-complete disavowal of Wagner's political concerns in favour of the director's – and to a certain extent Wagner's – psychoanalytical interests, it might have been more rewarding to carry through the latter into the final instalment. It was now not at all clear why the characters, despite strong individual performances, should be of any greater significance. If *Götterdämmerung* takes place on a relatively 'trivial level', then I hardly dare think what might qualify as profound, as world-historical. Even Alberich's reappearance to observe, Wanderer-like, the Immolation Scene – to start with, I thought he might

³ See reviews by Barry Millington in *The Wagner Journal*, iii/2 (2009), 74–82, and Mark Berry at <<http://boulezian.blogspot.com/2009/04/lohengrin-staatsoper-unter-den-linden-8.html>> and <<http://boulezian.blogspot.com/2009/04/lohengrin-royal-opera-27-april-2009.html>>.

⁴ George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung's Ring*, 4th edn (New York, 1967), 83.

be Wotan, though I have no idea whether the resemblance were deliberate – somehow seems shorn of significance. Perhaps this nihilism marks the ultimate in what Michael Tanner has termed ‘Domesticating Wagner’.⁵

For, whereas I had previously been led to expect a Jungian culmination after Robert Donington, *Götterdämmerung* seems more nihilist than anything else, albeit not in a Nietzschean sense, but rather as a consequence of ideas having run out. Patrice Chéreau pointing to the increasing desperation of this drama’s rituals, seeking a moral code in a post-religious society that knows no morality, indeed finds it impossible to ‘know’ anything.⁶ That, however, does not seem to be the point being made here. Nor, considered on its own terms, does the production have that Ibsen-like quality at which Braunschweig appeared to hint above. Attention-seeking touches such as a final, apparently ‘amusing’, bobbing up from the Rhine of the Rhinemaidens, seem just that: attention-seeking, indicative of a lack of anything to say. I have no especial regrets at a lack of staging for Siegfried’s Rhine Journey, though I could not help suspecting that the fall of the curtain suggested lack of interest rather than a positive decision. One might have suspected that the greatest problem in staging a *Ring* would be too many ideas, not too few: a depressing thought indeed. Had it not been for the stylishly minimalist – yet to what end? – sets and the technically accomplished, if oddly reticent, video projection of the Rhine in the opening scene of the third act, little would have been lost in a concert performance. Thought of as such, however, there is much to praise.



⁵ Chapter 4 of *Wagner* (London, 1996), 48–62.

⁶ Pierre Boulez and Patrice Chéreau, ‘Commentaires sur “Mythologie et Idéologie”’, *Programmhefte der Bayreuther Festspiele*, 1977, vi.81.

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